SHANDA FANTASY ARTS

34 July 2006

$4.99

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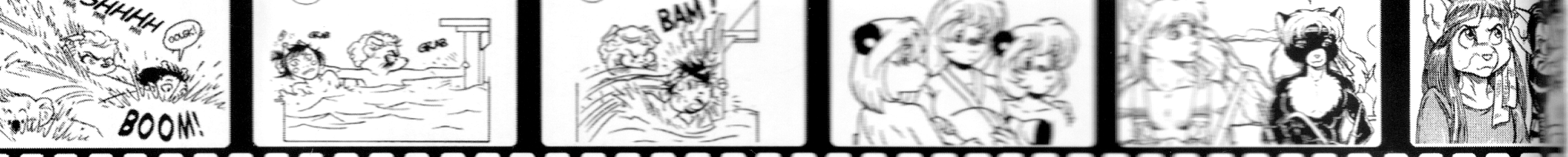
Katmandu

CHASTAIN



The INNER CIRCLE

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Best wishes for Steve and Bev

You didn't miss the third issue of ALBEDO ---it's been delayed until fall. Creator STEVE GALLACCI's Bev Clark is undergoing treatments for cancer and Steve is taking time off to care for her, to return to the adventures of Erma Felna later when things are calmer. Carole and I (who have gone through 3 bouts of cancer between us) and all the staff of Shanda Fantasy Arts wish them both well. If you wish to keep up with Steve and Bev, you can follow Steve's live journal here:

http://kvogel.livejournal.com/

Mike and Carole

www.shandafantasyarts.net

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IT'S GOOD TO HAVE A QUIET NIGHT OUTSIDE WITH THE KITTENS IN BED.

YES, WE DON'T GET TIME FOR OURSELVES OFTEN.

WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME A STORY ABOUT LISKA? ONE YOU'D RATHER NOT TELL THE KITTENS.

I'M CERTAIN SOME ARE TOO FRIGHTENING FOR THEM.

VERY WELL, I KNOW ONE I WOULD NEVER TELL OUR CHILDREN-- NOT UNTIL THEY'RE GROWN.

IT'S PERFECT FOR TONIGHT, WITH DARK CLOUDS OVER THE TWIN MOONS.

IT TAKES PLACE YEARS LATER IN LISKA'S STORY-- WHEN SHE GUIDED HER TRIBE WHEN THEY NEEDED HER MOST-- AND HOW SHE MET THE

WITCH OF THE WOODS.

STORY: CAROLE CURTIS ART: JASON CANTY

"MANY YEARS HAD PASSED. POWPOWNETHEE WAS CHIEF IN NAME ONLY AND SPENT HIS DAYS IN DREAMS. LISKA MITSEL-EMAN NOW LED HER TRIBE.

LISKA'S PEOPLE NORMALLY HAD CAMPS ON THE PLAINS, BUT DROUGHT HAD BROUGHT FAMINE. LISKA SET OUT TO FIND A NEW HOME FOR HER PEOPLE.

LEAVING HESTA AND PYNDAN TO WATCH OVER THE TRIBE, SHE TOOK HER SON QUIET BIRD WITH HER. HE HAD JUST UNDERGONE HIS MANHOOD CEREMONEY."

QUIET BIRD, THERE'S MOSS ON THIS SIDE OF THE LOG.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, FATHER?

EVERY OTHER PIECE OF WOOD WE'VE SEEN HAS BEEN TOTALLY DRY.

THERE'S SOMETHING TO THE NORTH.

SORRY FATHER, I FORGOT.

DON'T WORRY. IT'S A LOT TO LEARN-- BEING A WARRIOR.

LET'S GET BACK TO CAMP.

WE'RE DOWN TO THE LAST OF THE MAIZE FLOUR, SHAYGIN. I CAN SCRAPE TOGETHER ENOUGH FOR SOME BREAD.

LET'S BAKE IT AND TAKE IT TO THEA FOR HER KITTENS.

DID YOU AND QUIET BIRD FIND ANYTHING, LISKA?

YES, WE'RE LEAVING AS SOON AS WE'VE PACKED.

I'LL NEED MY BOW QUIVER AND KNIFE. BRIGHT EYES HAD TO SEE SOMEONE.

DANCING STAR?

QUIET BIRD! DID YOU AND YOUR FATHER HAVE ANY LUCK FINDING SIGN?

FATHER SAYS THERE IS WETLAND TO THE NORTH. WE'LL GO AND SEE IF WE CAN MOVE THE TRIBE THERE.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG WE'LL BE GONE.

IF I CATCH GAME, I'LL BRING IT BACK FOR YOUR FAMILY.

SO YOUR FATHER WILL KNOW I'M A GOOD PROVIDER.

I'LL KEEP YOUR TENT CLEAN FOR YOUR RETURN, QUIET BIRD.

OH, MY FATHER KNOWS THAT.

COME HOME SOON, QUIET BIRD.

PATCHES
I THINK THE WETLANDS ARE TWO DAYS NORTH. QUIET BIRD AND I WILL HURRY-

PATCHES... WHAT'S WRONG?

I'M JUST FRIGHTENED FOR YOU LISKA. I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN IN DANGER, BUT I JUST HAVE BAD FEELINGS ABOUT THIS TRIP.

PATCHES, YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN AFRAID OF ME BEING PHYSICAL WITH YOU. AS YOUR HUSBAND, I'M TELLING YOU, COME HERE.

THERE NOW, YOU CAN STOP SHAKING.

YOUR HUSBAND IS LISKA MISTEL-EMAN WAR CHIEF OF THE HIGHLAND TRIBE.

MY ENEMIES FEAR ME AND TREMBLE AND THOSE I LOVE ARE SAFE IN MY STRONG ARMS.

"LISKA AND QUIETBIRD SET OFF IMMEDIATELY, WITH TWO WARRIORS. THEY HOPED TO FIND GAME IN ROUTE AND SEND IT BACK TO THIER FAMILIES.

HOURS LATER LISKA SENT THEM HOME WITH A SMALL HERNDON.

SHE AND QUIET BIRD CUT STRIPS OF MEAT FOR THEMSELVES THEN TRAVELED ON."

HAVE YOU EVER GONE THIS FAR WEST, FATHER?

NONE OF OUR TRIBE HAS.

SON, I SMELL SOMETHING. WE NEED TO GET TO THAT HILLTOP TO SEE BETTER.

FATHER, I HAVE AN IDEA. MY LEGS ARE LONGER. I CAN GET THERE FASTER.

QUIET BIRD! THERE IT IS!

WHAT, FATHER?

IT'S A *FOREST!*

WHAT'S A FOREST, FATHER?

MORE TREES THAN YOU'VE EVER SEEN! NOT INDIVIDUAL ONES, OR THICKETS, BUT A GATHERING OF TREES LIKE THE FALL TRIBAL COUNCIL!

AND THAT MEANS WATER AND *GAME*, QUIET BIRD!

FATHER! I SEE A RIVER TO THE NORTH!

SHALL WE RUN TO IT, FATHER?

DANGER? HAH! QUIET BIRD, I WON MY WARRIOR'S SASH BY SLAYING THREE WARRIORS YOUR SIZE WHEN I WAS NO OLDER THAN YOU!

NO. I WILL WALK TO IT.

YOU NEED TO GO BACK AND GET OUR PEOPLE.

IF THERE'S DANGER IN THOSE WOODS, IT HAD BETTER BEWARE ME!

SHOULDN'T I GO WITH YOU INTO THE FOR-FOREST IN CASE THERE'S DANGER?

SORRY FATHER, I'LL GO QUICKLY.

I'LL ENTER BY THAT ROCKPILE AND LEAVE SIGN FOR YOU.

HURRY BACK, I'LL HAVE GAME.

GODDESS, WATCH OVER FATHER AS SHE WATCHES OVER US.

THESE TREES ARE ANCIENT. WHEN WE MAKE OUR HOME HERE WE'LL HAVE TO BE CAREFUL AND NOT HARM THEM.

STRANGE BEAST. *NEVER* SAW ONE LIKE HIM BEFORE. BUT MY FAMILY WILL HAVE FULL STOMACHS TOMORROW.

IT'S AN ELK.

WHAT?

THAT ANIMAL. IT'S CALLED AN ELK.

WHO ARE YOU? IS YOUR TRIBE NEARBY?

THAT'S AN ELK. THIS FOREST IS FULL OF THEM. OTHER GAME AS WELL.

I KNOW.

THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME. I'M BRINGING MY PEOPLE HERE.

SO DO YOU WANT SOME OF THIS, LITTLE GIRL?

I'M OVER HERE, LISTENING TO THE RIVER.

IS IT NEARBY? I SAW PART OF IT FROM THE HILL.

OH YES, IT'S JUST BEYOND THOSE ROCKS.

YOU SHOULD GIVE ME YOUR NAME SO WE CAN TALK.

MY NAME IS LISKA.

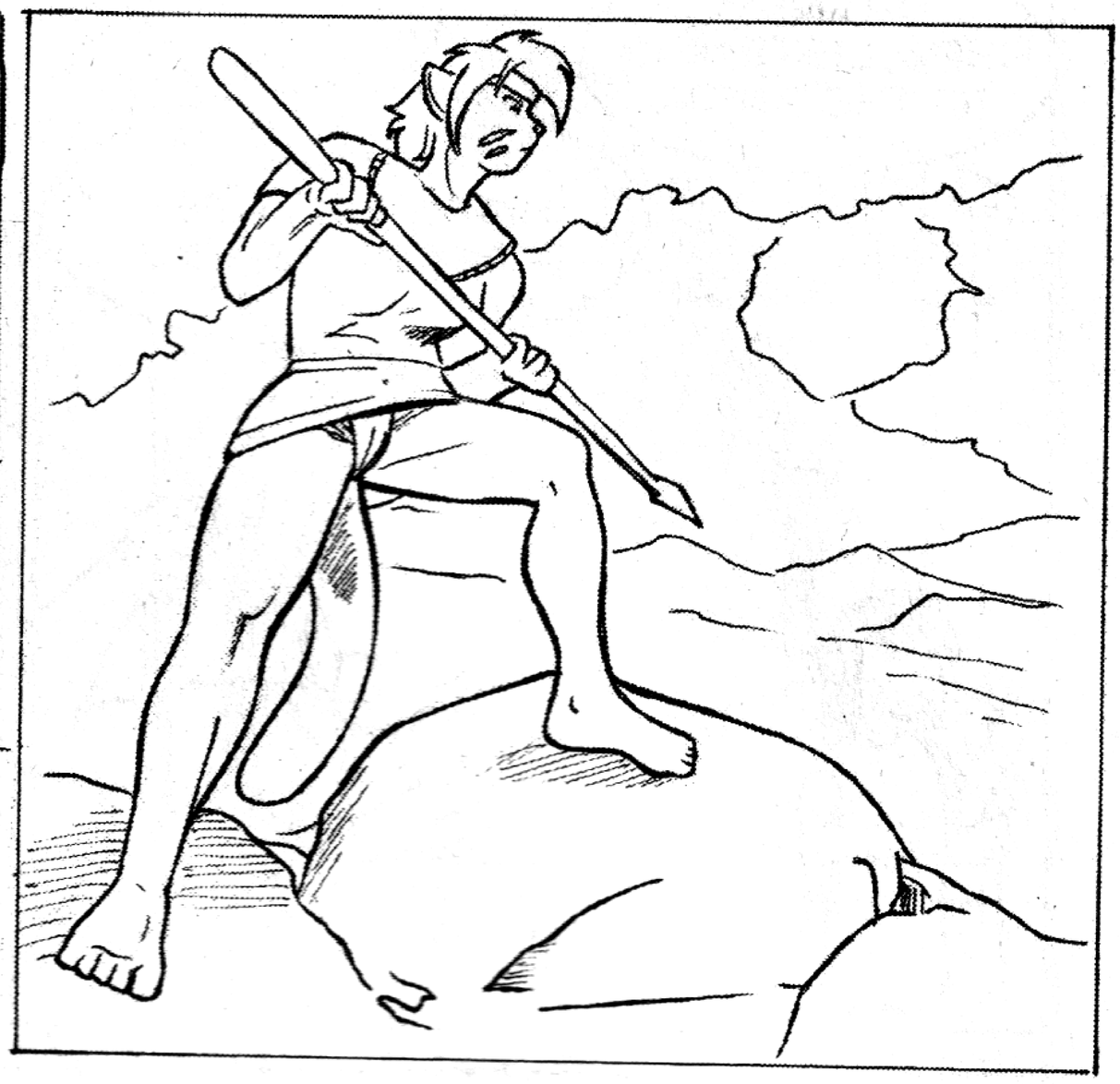
I'M CALLED KLIKATAT.

THAT'S AN UNUSUAL NAME.

WELL, KLIKATAT, I THINK I'LL VISIT THAT RIVERBED FOR A MOMENT.

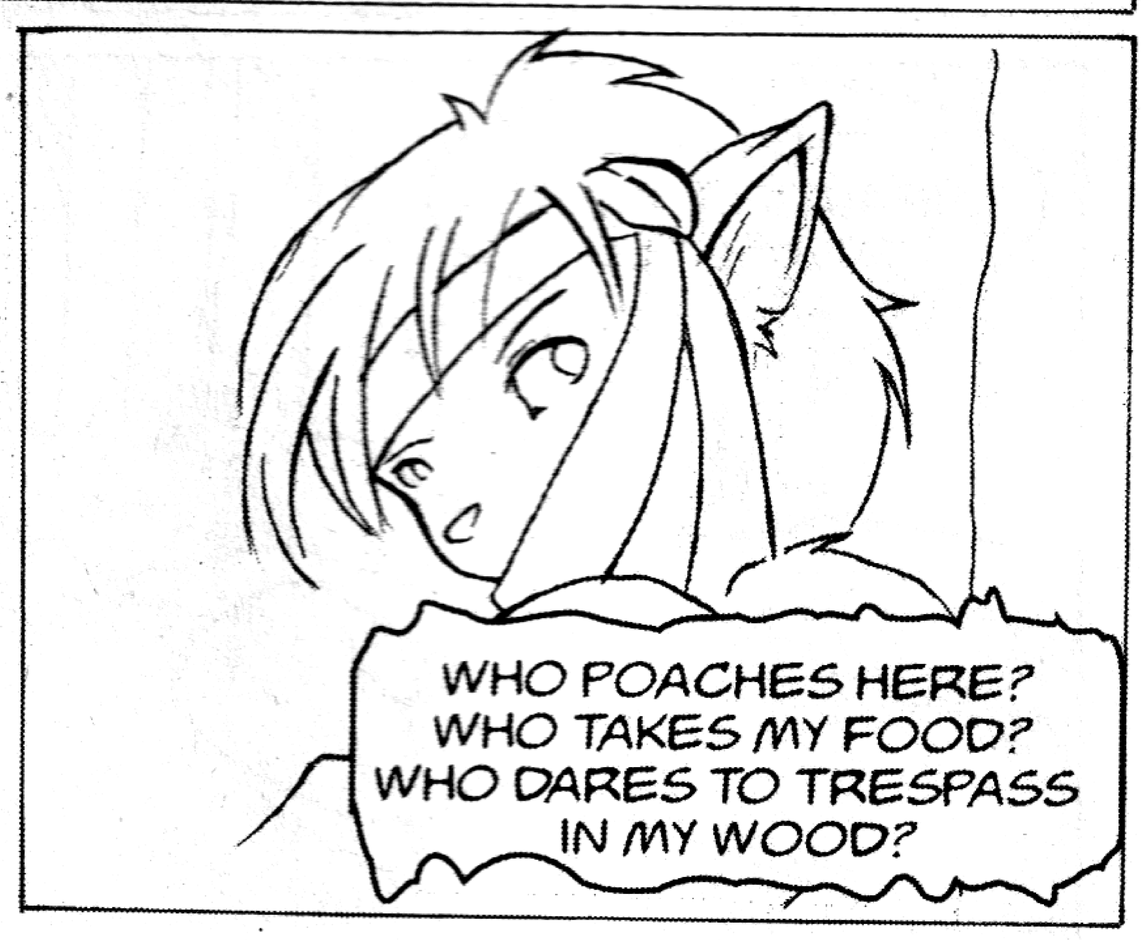
THAT'S A BEAUTIFUL SIGHT TO MY EYES.

I DON'T WANT MY LEATHERS' TO GET WET.



HA!

THE "ELK" IS FOR MY FAMILY...
BUT THIS IS MY DINNER.


WHO POACHES HERE?
WHO TAKES MY FOOD?
WHO DARES TO TRESPASS IN MY WOOD?

LITTLE KITTEN WITH SHARPENED STICK. THINK YOU THAT YOUR EYE IS QUICK?

THE SIGNS YOU MISSED ARE PLAIN TO SEE, THIS WOODED GLEN BELONGS TO *ME!*

IT'S DEATH YOU BRING TO MY GREEN PLACE, WHERE NE'ER BEFORE SHE SHOWED HER FACE.

ONE MUST FOLLOW BEFORE SHE'LL LEAVE...

YOUR WOMEN MUST PREPARE TO GRIEVE!

I MEAN YOU NO HARM OLD RAT WOMAN. MY PEOPLE STARVE. HERE THERE IS PLENTY FOR ALL.

WE WILL PROTECT YOUR WOODS AND DO NO HARM TO IT.

YOUR STANCE HERE IS HARM! YOU'RE BREAKING THE CHARM!

YOU BRING DEATH IN YOUR WAKE AND YOUR LIFE I SHALL TAKE!

THINK
YOU WOOD CAN DO ME HURT?
SPEARS WON'T SEE MY LIFEBLOOD
SPURT.

YOUR
ARROW'S WEAK, WILL DO
NO HARM...

YEILD YOU MUST TO
MY WITCHLY CHARM.

SWIFT YOUR ARROWS, AS THEY FLY... PREPARE YOURSELF, FOR NOW YOU DIE...

IT MAY BE MY TIME TO DIE, WITCH-.

-BUT I WON'T DIE ALONE!

IRON? IRON! HOW DID A SAVAGE KNOW IT WOULD RAVAGE?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE KNIFE IS MADE OF-

HESTA GAVE IT TO ME, SHE GOT IT IN A TRADE FAR AWAY.

IT'S IRON!

IT'S IRON...

YOU CAN TAKE YOUR KNIFE NOW.

SHE'S GONE. SHE WON'T COME BACK.

KLIKATAT?

I'M SORRY IF SHE WAS A FRIEND OF YOURS...

BUT SHE TRIED TO KILL ME.

SHE WASN'T MY FRIEND, BUT I KNEW HER, AS I KNOW YOU, LISKA

MITSEL-EMAN, CHIEF OF THE HIGHLAND PEOPLE.

KLIKATAT? WHAT DOES YOUR NAME MEAN?

IT'S FROM A VERY OLD TONGUE. IT MEANS THE SOUND OF BONES RATTLING.

I'LL SEE YOU AGAIN, LISKA MISTEL-EMAN. BUT NOT FOR MANY YEARS.

"LISKA RETURNED TO THE EDGE OF THE WOODS AND SAW HER PEOPLE COMING IN THE DISTANCE. THE HIGHLAND PEPOLE LIVED IN THE FOREST FOR YEARS, BUT LISKA ONLY SHARED THE STORY OF KLIKATATAND THE WITCH WITH HER FAMILY."

AND *THAT'S* A STORY I WON'T TELL THE KITTENS.

LET'S GO INSIDE.

THORIN? ARE YOU COMING TO BED?

THORIN?

END

Katmandu II: Tambo

Chapter Two: Prelude to a Festival

"Wow! Your uncle is really strong, Loanzah!" Emilio whispered.

"Yeah, but I bet he could've lifted her even higher because your mom is so little." she whispered, back.

"She's not so little."

"Daddy says she is."

"But, she's as big as your mom."

"Oh. Well, maybe he meant that she's smaller than a boy."

"Yup, I guess so."

The two kittens watched as Kichoro was set upon the ground. Once there, the pair hurried over to her side.

"Are you okay, Mama?" Emilio asked, wrapping his arms around her legs.

"Yes, Dear, I'm okay." she answered, breathlessly. "Thanks to Mr. Leonius, here, I-…"

"Milady, please." Trajan interrupted. "'Mr. Leonius' is my father's name. As old as I am, I am not nearly as old as he." he said, a teasing smile lighting his features. "Just Trajan is quite alright."

"Oh, I see." Kichoro said, carefully. "Well, thanks to him, I'm alright."

"And so is the cake!" Thorin said, as he swiped the treat from his brother's hands. "Not that it can compare in importance to you, Ki. Still, I'm glad that all your efforts in making it hadn't gone to waste because of an illegal play on my brother's part."

"Illegal play?" cried another of the Leonius brothers. Kichoro recognized his voice as the jokester from moments before. Yet, unlike Trajan, this brother bared an uncanny resemblance to Thorin. From his blonde hair and blue eyes to his yellow-gold coat and lithe build, he was the spitting image of Leahtrah's mate. He came to stand beside his brother, demanding clarity for the accusation charged against him. "What do you mean by that, Thorin? That play was completely legal!"

"Perhaps…if you were playing against a blind man! That pass was completely foul and you know it, Layn."

Layn, as he was called, grabbed his chest where his heart resided beneath and gasped, dramatically. "You wound me with such a charge, brother. To think that I your loving family would willingly cheat my own… I'm insulted?"

"So am I." another man said, as he swatted Thorin and Layn behind their ears. Kichoro figured that he was yet another of the Leonius brothers for he, too, shared many of the same commonalities that Thorin and Layn held. Yet, his height and build was much more solid than either of theirs. He was taller and stouter and carried an air of authority about him that the other

two submitted to almost instantly. “Show some respect in the lady’s presence.” he demanded. “Introductions haven’t even been made and you’re already squabbling in front of her like two rowdy kittens.”

“Aww, we weren’t really arguing, Achilles.” Thorin said, as he rubbed his head with his free hand.

“Yeah, can’t you tell when we’re joking?” Layn asked, as he, too, nursed his wounds.

“Of course I can.” replied Achilles. “It’s especially easy with you since you never cease to joke.” he said to Layn, earning him a cheeky smile in response. “At any rate, forgive my brothers their rudeness, dear lady. They’re really just over-sized kittens, after all. I am Achilles Leonius and this is my younger brother Layn. I believe you know Thorin, already.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Kichoro Tambo and this is my son, Emilio.” she replied, pulling the boy close to her as she said his name.

“I see.” he said, looking down at Emilio. “And let me say that you have raised a very well-mannered son.”

”I’ll say.” Layn chimed. “He apologized after he tackled me.”

“It was a good tackle, too, Emilio.” Thorin said, winking at the lad. “We took the lead because of that play.”

“That just goes to show how terrible you were in math, Thorin.” Layn said. “Your team is still down by one point.”

”No, but we would be if we allowed your illegitimate play to-“ Thorin replied, but was cut short by the sound of screaming. He looked up to see Kichoro seemingly being attacked by a riding lizard. The creature had its muzzle at her throat and was attempting to taste her sweetness by licking her chest. She, for her part, fought of the beast as best she could while ushering Emilio and Loanzah safely behind her.

“KALON! NO!” Achilles shouted, as he rushed over. By this time, Trajan had already placed himself between the woman and the animal and was working to restrain the hungry beast. From the shadowy side of the house, yet another riding lizard appeared and was making its way over toward the melee.

“Tentuh, down.” Trajan said in a firm, yet peaceable voice. As if by magic, the approaching lizard stopped in its tracks and lied down in the grass where it had formerly stood.

“I always said you got the good one, Trajan.” Achilles said, as he grabbed a harness that was still affixed to the first animal’s head and lead it away.

“There’s nothing wrong with Kalon, brother.” Trajan replied. “You just need to treat him as you would a child, that’s all.”

“You are the one who’s fond of children, not me. I could just as well do…” he started, but fell silent as he recalled the company he kept. “Never mind.”

“Very wise.” Trajan replied, with a knowing smile. He turned his attention to Kichoro and the kittens who had remained securely behind him ever since he stepped in on their behalf. “Are you all alright?”

“Y-…yes. I think so.” Kichoro answered, shakily. “Emilio, Loanzah, are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m okay.” Loanzah answered.

“Me too…” Emilio said, distantly, his eyes looking beyond both adults to where Achilles was leading the lizard, Kalon. He watched as he lead Kalon to where the other lizard, Tentuh, sat and reluctantly lay beside him. That settled, Achilles made his way back to the others.

“I am so sorry, Mrs. Tambo. He’s usually very placid and easy to deal with, although not always obedient.” he sniffed. “Still, I don’t know what came over him.”

“I think I do.” Trajan said as gently brought his nose to Kichoro’s hair and inhaled, deeply. “You smell of cinnamon and honey. Were you baking before just before you came here?”

”Yes, I was. I was baking the cake that I brought over.” she answered.

“And I believe that’s exactly what Kalon scented. I’m afraid he mistook you for a sweet treat and tried to have bite…um…of you.”

“Speaking of which…” Layn began. “Would you all mind if we, uh…” he said, gesturing to the cake that Thorin still held.

“It’s braved two ordeals in one night without hitting the ground.” Thorin agreed. “It wouldn’t be wise to press our luck.”

”Did I mention that they’re younger brothers?” Achilles mused, dryly.

****

After the events following Kichoro and Emilio’s arrival, the night continued in relative peace. Thorin and his brothers were permitted back into the house after vowing to behave in a more civil manner than they had initially displayed. Yet, even upholding behaviors more akin to civility, Leahtrah and Kichoro still found themselves retreating to a quiet room of the house to chat and enjoy hot tea and the long awaited cake. The others gathered in the living room to play a board game, as was suggested by Leahtrah. They littered the floor in groups of two, each brother pairing up with one of the children to face off against the remaining six. However, it wasn’t long before the renewed silence was interrupted by the soft cries of the newest additions to the Leonius house.

“Well, duty calls.” Thorin said, as he got up and headed toward the kittens’ room. “Don’t try and cheat your way out of this one, Layn!”

“I do not engage in such dishonorable acts, my good sir.” he answered in an overly snooty voice.

”Riiight. Milpul, keep your eye on him.”

“Aye, sir.” Milpul answered, with a salute.

“Hey, kiddo, you’re supposed to be on my side.” Layn whispered.

“Sorry, Uncle Layn.” he replied. “Daddy said no cheating.”

"Well, I'll let it go this time, but now we have to try extra hard to win."

"We can do it. I know we can if we try."

"'I know we can if we try.' Now who does that sound like, Achilles?"

"Sounds exactly like something Thorin would say if you ask me. Of course, you are just like he was when he was a kitten." he said to Milpul.

Milpul beamed at that comment. Even though his parents always encouraged him to be himself, it was nice to know that he was a great deal like his father, especially since he didn't bear a great resemblance to him.

"Hey, Uncle Achilles?" Milpul asked.

"What is it, Half-Pint?"

"You and Uncle Trajan are twins, right?"

"Yes."

"And Daddy and Uncle Layn are twins, too, right?"

"Right."

"But, Daddy and Uncle Layn look alike. Why don't you and Uncle Trajan look alike?"

"It's because your Uncle Trajan is something of a black sheep. That's all."

"Black sheep? What's that?"

"Actually, Milpul," Trajan interrupted. "The truth is that I don't particularly favor anyone. I'm not exactly sure where I get my features from."

"Although, what we really suspect is that he was just an orphan that our gentle mother picked up." Layn teased.

"An orphan?" Emilio asked, eagerly.

Trajan smiled. "Don't worry, kitten. I'm not really an orphan."

"What's wrong, Brother?" Achilles asked. "The thought of being an unwanted urchin displeases you?"

"No more than the knowledge of knowing that I am really and truly related to the lot of you." he joked.

The three brothers laughed, merrily at their jest. The kittens gathered about them didn't quite understand the humor the adults shared, yet that insignificant fact didn't stop them from enjoying the laughter…all save one.

"Hey…" Emilio began in a small voice. "Are all orphans unwanted?"

"I would imagine so." Achilles answered, coolly. "If they weren't, their parents wouldn't have abandoned them in the first place."

"Oh." Emilio said, softly.

The assembled party continued to talk and laugh, sharing events of past and present and hopes of the future. Milpul had found the truck he had been searching for earlier that day and was busy showcasing it to Layn. Achilles was busy regaling Loanzah and Kemal with the story of how he and Trajan acquired their riding lizards and the obstacles they faced in rearing them. Emilio sat silently listening and watching the others in their chatter. Although his body was present his mind wandered elsewhere. He watched the others for a moment longer before slowly getting to his feet and leaving their company.

Trajan noticed the child leave and began to suspect that something was amiss. Concern for the youth brought him to his feet, following the path that Emilio had exited. He traversed the halls and corridors of the house until he found the child in the room where Kichoro and Leahtrah had escaped to earlier. Trajan entered the room and at once noticed the boy kneeling before his mother, sobbing in her lap. Seeing him enter, Kichoro got to her feet and stormed over, seething with rage. She stood before him trying to form the words to convey what she sought to say, but words failed her. Finally, what she could not say in speech, she said with force and struck him about the face.

From where she sat, Leahtrah watched the transaction unfold, yet said nothing. Instead, she observed and mentally recorded everything that was playing before her.

Absently, Trajan touched his cheek. Pain had already begun to well up beneath his fingertips, yet he knew that it paled in comparison to that experienced by mother and child. "I understand." he said. "And I apologize."

He turned his attention to Emilio who stood beside the chair his mother had just vacated. Trajan walked over and kneeled before him so that he could talk, face to face. "I'm sorry, Emilio." he said. "The things you heard were said in complete and total ignorance and I'm sorry you had to hear it."

"It's okay." the boy answered. "You didn't know that I am…unwanted, too."

"Now hold on just a minute there." Trajan said, softly, as he pulled the child close, setting him upon his lap. "Now, when you were living at the orphanage were there a lot of other children living there, too?"

Gingerly, Emilio nodded his head.

"Still, out of all the other children your mama and papa could have chosen, they chose you. Do you know why?"

The boy shook his head in genuine confusion.

"Well, it must be because they wanted you. To them, you were a most special and wonderful child and the only one they wanted to bring into their home and make a part of their family. Am I right?"

Emilio glanced over at Kichoro who smiled her warm smile down upon him. Finding a smile of his own, he returned his gaze to Trajan's and nodded once more.

Smiling softly, Trajan turned to Kichoro. "You see that woman, there?" he asked. "Who is she?"

"That's Mama." Emilio answered.

"'Mama' is it? Then, she must love you very much. In fact, I bet she tells you as much everyday, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, she tells me she loves me all the time, like, when she tucks me in for bed or when I wake up in the morning." he agreed, merrily.

"And, do you believe her?"

"Yes, I believe her!" he said with conviction.

Trajan smiled. "I believe she does, too. Well, let's see. We know your mama loves you, so I'm sure your papa does as well. Then there're your friends, Loanzah, Kemal and Milpul. They're all awfully fond of you."

"Loanzah is my best friend, but I really like Kemal and Milpul, too."

"And it's obvious that they all really like you, too, not to mention Thorin and Leah. They must be quite fond of you, too." He leaned over and whispered, "If they didn't, they wouldn't have shared that delicious cake your mother brought over tonight with you."

Emilio giggled at that thought.

"It's true, you saw first hand the ways of my brother's appetite." Trajan said, sitting up once more. "And you know what else? Even though I've only known you for a little while, I'm sure that I like you, too."

"Really?" he asked, hopefully.

"Well, of course I do. There isn't anything at all not to like about you. You're smart and friendly and you play a great game of scrabble ball." he chuckled, tussling the boy's hair.

Emilio giggled, once again and smiled brightly up at Trajan.

"So you see, kitten, you are surrounded by people who love you and who love being around you. No matter what happens, never forget that you are loved and that you are wanted. Promise?"

"I promise, I won't ever forget again." the child replied, holding his hand up and extending his littlest finger before him. Remembering the ritual from his own youth, Trajan brought forth his hand, extending the littlest finger as Emilio had done and locked it with Emilio's, sealing the promise forever and always.

"So, do you think you're ready to go back to the others? I'm sure they're missing your company about now."

"Okay." he said, getting to his feet. "Are you gonna go back, too?"

"Sure I will, but, not just yet. My old bones need to rest a bit. Why don't you run along and I'll follow you up in a minute."

"Alright." Emilio scampered off, hurrying along his way when he suddenly stopped and headed back. With the spontaneity that only a child could know, he tumbled onto Trajan's lap and hugged him, fondly. "Thank you for making me feel better." he said and just as suddenly as he had appeared, he hurried off again, pausing on his trek to favor his mother with a loving embrace before vanishing from sight.

Trajan watched him leave, feeling somehow taller from the thanks that the child had imparted to him. It was a delightful feeling, one that he had longed for far longer than he could recount. He hoped it would not be the last time he would enjoy such emotion.

"It's rare to see such tenderness among male children." Leahtrah said, breaking the silence that had ensued within the confines of the room. "Truly, I've only seen the like among him and Kemal."

"I suspect it has a great deal to do with exceptional parenting, especially on the part of their mothers." Trajan said, earning a modest smile from his sister-in-law. "Still, it's a wonderful trait to be found in kittens so young. You have a beautiful son there, Mrs. Tambo."

"Yes, he is. …and he means the world to me." she said, looking away in the direction where her son had left the room. She smiled, softly then turned, slowly, toward Leahtrah and Trajan. Her eyes found his for a moment, then with haste, cast them downward. "It seems I owe you an apology, Mr. Leonius."

"Not at all, milady. The fault was still entirely mine. I shouldn't have been so careless."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't excuse the way I behaved. I-…I shouldn't have…"

Rising to his feet, Trajan walked over to where the lady stood and smiled a smile that spoke of understanding. "Please, dear lady, do not give it another thought. Your concern was for your son. In all honesty, if I had a fine child like that, I can imagine that I would be very protective of him, too."

"I see." she said, looking away, once more. "At any rate, it's grown rather late and I think I'd better be getting on my way, now."

"Oh, Kiki, do you really have to?" Leahtrah asked, getting up from her seat."

"I'm afraid I do, Leah. I have things at home that I must attend to. The festival is to be held the day after tomorrow and I still have yet to finish Emilio's costume for the play. Not to mention the baking that I was asked to see to. So, I really must be off."

"If you must go, then you must go." Trajan said. "However, as you've already pointed out, the hour is late. It seems inappropriate for a woman to walk home alone. If you'd permit me or one of my brothers to accompany you or, perhaps we could call for your husband so he could..." he started, but fell silent as he noticed Leahtrah out of the corner of his eye shaking her head, silently encouraging him to say no more. He returned his focus to Kichoro who looked as though she were studying the ground at her feet. Slowly she turned and started toward the door.

"I appreciate your concern," she said, as she continued away. "But, I'll be fine. It won't be the first time I've taken myself home."

An irrational anger began to rise within Trajan as he heard Kichoro's omission. He hadn't known this woman long, yet he knew enough to know that she was a kind soul who deserved more from her mate than negligence. "Forgive me for saying so," he began. "But it is a man's place to ensure the safety of his family. While your husband may not have the means to attend to his duties in that regard, I-…" he continued, but was quickly silenced by Leahtrah who jabbed him in his side, commanding his silence.

"You're right." Kichoro said in a distant, shallow voice. "It is a man's place to protect his family, to provide for them, to care for them…to love them. I know, because my husband is all those things." Slowly, she turned around facing the two with eyes filled with unshed tears. "If only he were still alive, it wouldn't hurt so much to know that." As the tears slipped from her eyes, so too

did her hold on her strength, that that she had been holding to ever since the night began. That strength spent, she fell to her knees and sobbed, freely.

Leahtrah rushed over to her friend and held her, tenderly in her arms. "Easy, Kiki, easy." she whispered. "Stay here, tonight. Tomorrow, we can work on your tasks together. Tonight, you shouldn't be alone. Please, stay with me." She could feel the woman nod her head against bosom and was glad that her words had reached her. "Come, dear sister, let's get you to bed."

Leahtrah helped the saddened woman to stand and, together, they left the room. Trajan stood, looking after them, feeling as though he were the most miserable being on the planet. How could he have been so stupid? It was such an obvious thing, really. How could he have not seen it? Despondently, he sank to the floor and lay on his back, looking up at the ceiling above him. He had sure made a mess of things this night. He shut his eyes, tightly, and tried to think of nothing, yet the image of the weeping widow showed clearly behind his closed lids. Unable to tolerate the insufferable sight of her, knowing that he was the cause of her despair, Trajan opened his eyes, gasping at the sight before him. Standing above him, looking down with large viridian eyes stood Emilio. His expression was somber and Trajan feared that he had witnessed his mother's breakdown, a breakdown that was caused at his hands. Having Kichoro in the state that she was in now was hard enough on him. Yet, having this child knowing his sin was more than he could bear.

"Are you still coming back out?" Emilio asked, interrupting Trajan in his thoughts.

"Huh?" he mused, baffled.

"You said you were gonna come back in a minute." the child said, settling down beside him. He reached out his small spotted arm and placed his hand on Trajan's brow. "Are you lying down because you feel sick?"

With a wry, mirthless chuckle, Trajan answered, "Indeed I do feel sick, Emilio. I don't think I'll be joining you all, just yet. I'm sorry."

"That's okay. If you don't feel well, you should just lie down."

"I think I will for a bit."

"Then, I'll stay with you." Emilio said, finding a spot beside the elder Leonius brother, nestled against him.

"Oh, you don't have to stay with me. You'd probably have a lot more fun out there with Achilles and Layn and the kittens."

"That's okay." the boy replied, shutting his eyes. "I want to stay with you. It's nice to have people next to you when you're sick. Oh!" he exclaimed, sitting up and facing Trajan. "Is it okay if I stay with you or do you want me to go?"

Smiling, softly, he said, "Actually, I'd rather enjoy a bit of company right now."

The child smiled his acknowledgement and returned to rest beside Trajan's mountainous form. His was a soothing presence, one that brought ease to a troubled spirit and help to dispel the images of despair from Trajan's mind. It wasn't long before Emilio surrendered to the urge of slumber's call and was fast asleep. It brought Trajan a measure of joy to see him sound asleep as he was. At least someone was able to go seemingly unaffected by something he had done that night. He sure had made a mess of things, he lamented and as slumber reached out to claim him, he wondered how he would brave the coming day in light of the disaster that he had caused this night.

Katmandu & Here Comes a Candle

Are we all met?
Here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal.
This green plot shall be our stage---
Come, sit down, every mother's son and rehearse your parts,
Everyone according to his cue.
Wm. Shakespeare
Midsummer Night's Dream

BLACKBOOTS, LOVE, YOU'RE RIGHT. THIS **DOES** LOOK LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO PUT IN FOR SUPPLIES.

HERE BE YER FIREARM, MARSTER NEDWIN.

AYE, QUALITY, WE SHOULD FIND WATER AND FOOD HERE. NOW, DID 'EE SAY 'EE SAW SMOKE? A CAMP, MOST LIKE. WHERE AWAY?

-- BEYOND THOSE TREES, I THINK.

WELL, STAN? SHALL WE TAKE ADVANTAGE OF MORE UNWARY TRAVELLERS?

CERTAINLY, OLLIE.

GOOD AFTERNOON, MADAME. COULD MY FRIEND AND I BE OF ASSISTANCE?

AYE, WE NEEDS T' TAKE ON SUPPLIES. 'EE KNOWS THIS AREA?

VERY WELL! WE CAN GUIDE YOU TO THE BEST HUNTING SPOTS--- COOL WATER--- AND CROPS!

WE'LL PAY ONE KNIFE EACH.

OH, THAT WILL BE FINE WITH US.

SOUNDS TOO EASY--

NO DICKERING--- WE NEEDS T' TAKE CARE.

WHEN I CATCH THOSE TWO---

CALM DOWN, LISKA. THEY CAN'T HAVE TRAVELLED FAR.

I'LL CALM DOWN WHEN WE HAVE THEM. THEY STOLE OUR PACK LIZARDS AND OUR TRADE GOODS FOR THE RIVER TRIBE.

ANYWAY, THIEVES LIKE THAT CAN'T BE TOO SMART.

I DON'T KNOW. THEY'RE RIDING AND WE'RE AFOOT.

OLLIE, DO YOU THINK THIS WILL BE AS EASY AS BEFORE?

STANLEY, IT'LL BE EVEN SLICKER THAN WHEN WE TRICKED THOSE WARRIORS. THESE PACK LIZARDS CAN CARRY SO MUCH FROM THAT SHIP WE'LL BE THE RICHEST PEOPLE IN THE LAND!

HELLO, HELLO! STANLEY AND I BROUGHT BLANKETS FOR EVERYONE!

DO WE NEED THEM?

OH, YES! IT GETS VERY COLD AT NIGHT.

WE CAN ALL BED DOWN AND HAVE A WARM NIGHT'S SLEEP. AT FIRST DAWN WE'LL LEAD YOU TO MORE GAME THAN YOU'VE EVER SEEN!

I'M STILL SUSPICIOUS.

DON'T FRET, QUALITY. A LIGHT SLEEPER I BE.

AND BESIDES, THIS BLANKET SMELLS MIGHTY NICE---

I DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS! OUR PACK ANIMALS AND ALL OUR TRADE GOODS ARE IN THIS CLEARING.
ABANDONED? EVERYTHING'S HERE BUT A FEW BLANKETS.
SOMETHING'S WRONG. THEY LEFT A TRAIL. LET'S FOLLOW.
SEE, STANLEY? THE POTION WORKS LIKE ALWAYS. JUST DOUSE THEIR BLANKETS AND THEY'RE FAST ASLEEP.
NOW WE CAN TAKE ALL THEIR WEAPONS AND GOODS. I THINK THE CAPTAIN'S BOOTS WILL FIT YOU, OLLIE.
ZZZZZZ
ZZZZZZ
NEXT MORNING...
BELAY THAT, QUALITY! WHERE BE ME BOOTS?
WHERE'S MY BLANKET?

ME SWORD 'N ME HAT IS GONE, TOO!
CAP'N, ALL OUR GUNS HAS DISAPPEARED.
AND SO HAVE THE BLANKETS-- WITH THE TWO THAT BROUGHT THEM.
THE TRAIL LEADS HERE, BUT THESE STRANGERS AREN'T WHO WE'RE LOOKING FOR.
ODD LOOKING LOT, AREN'T THEY?
LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE CONFUSED--- --- AND NO WEAPONS. THE BIG FEMALE SEEMS TO BE THE CHIEF.

GOOD DAWNING. I AM LISKA MITSEL-EMAH, CLAN LEADER OF THE HIGHLAND PEOPLE. MY FRIENDS AND I ARE LOOKING FOR TWO THIEVES. ONE THIN, ONE PLUMP.

TWO THIEVES, 'EE SAYS? AYE, WE KNOWS 'EM-- WELL.

THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO GUIDE US TO GAME AND WATER--- BUT THEY TRICKED US. I'M NEDWIN, AND THIS IS MY WIFE, BLACKBOOTS.

HOW DID THEY TRICK YOU?

BLANKETS, SCENTED WITH SOME POTION.

THAT MUST BE HOW WE WERE FOOLED!

A CAPTAIN, YOU SAY? IS THAT LIKE A CHIEF?

AYE, AND ME VILLAGE FLOATS YONDER, ON THE SEA.

LISKA! THERE'S A TRAIL BROKEN HERE. PERHAPS THEY TOOK A DIFFERENT ROUTE TO THEIR CAMP.

WE KNOW WHERE THEY'RE HEADED. WILL YOU ACCOMPANY US?

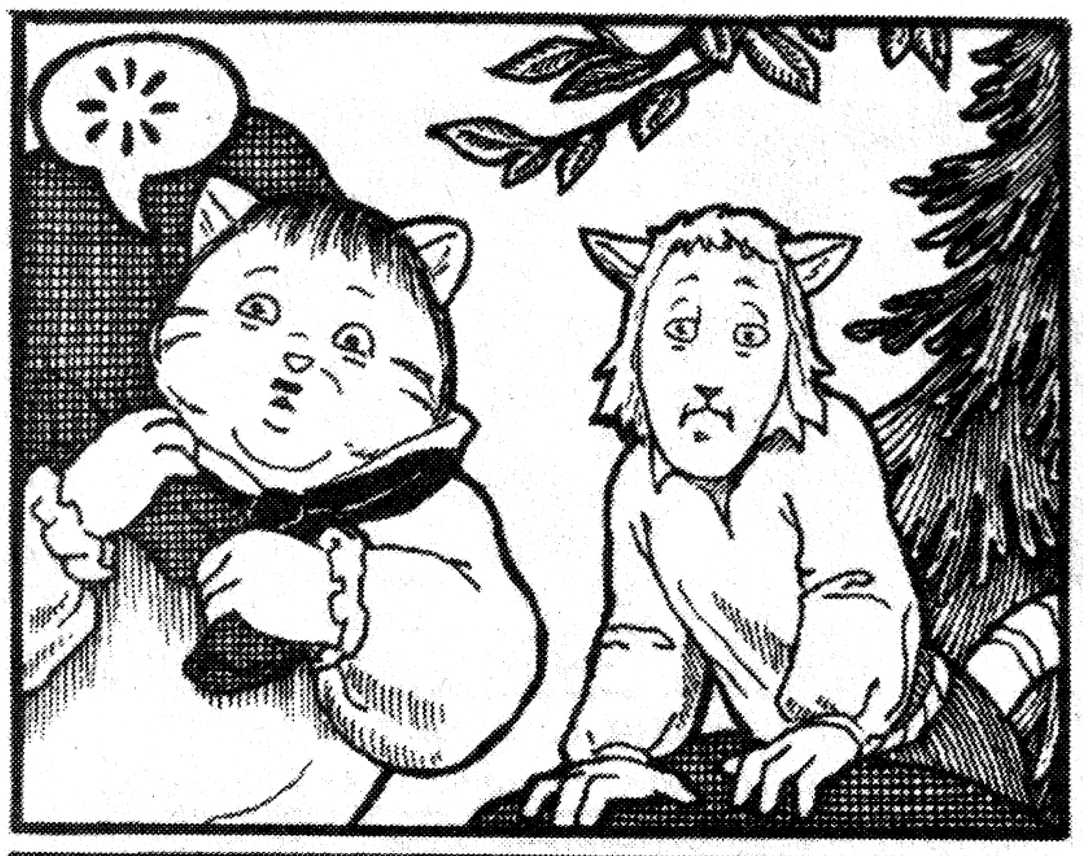
HAH! TRY'N STOP US!

WISE MEN NEVER SIT AND WAIL THEIR LOSS, BUT CHEERILY SEEK HOW TO REDRESS THEIR HARMS. WM. SHAKESPEARE

OLLIE, I'LL BE GLAD WHEN WE CAN LOAD THIS ON THE LIZARDS.

WELL, STANLEY, WE'RE ALMOST THERE.

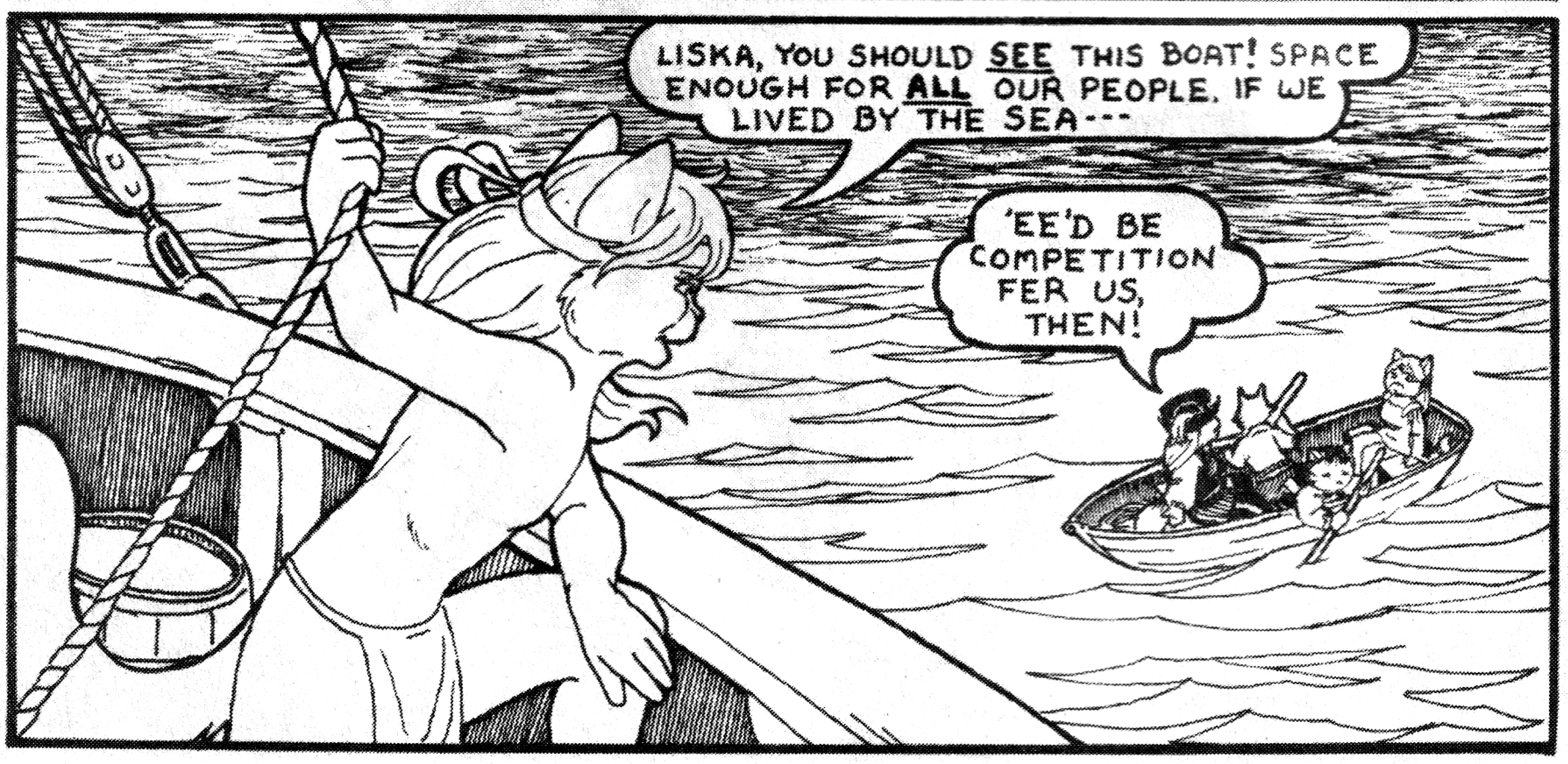
WELCOME ABOARD, ME LADS.



GOOD MORNING, LADIES! STANLEY AND I WERE JUST BRINGING THESE CLOTHES TO THE STREAM FOR WASHING.
YEH. WE WERE GOING TO HAVE THE LIZARDS HELP.

NA, THAT BE TOO THIN. WE HAS OUR POSSESSIONS AND WE HAS 'EE. NOW WE JUST DECIDES WHAT T'DO WITH 'EE.

THIS IS ANOTHER FINE MESS YOU'VE GOTTEN US INTO, STANLEY.


LISKA, YOU SHOULD SEE THIS BOAT! SPACE ENOUGH FOR ALL OUR PEOPLE, IF WE LIVED BY THE SEA---
'EE'D BE COMPETITION FER US, THEN!

ALL RIGHT, 'EE LUBBERS. THIS WARRIOR'S RELEASED 'ER CLAIM ON 'EE. TO PAY ME BACK, 'EE'LL WORK ON ME SHIP. WORK WELL, AND WE'LL PUT 'EE OFF NEXT PORT. WORK BADLY, AND WE'LL JUST PUT 'EE OFF.

WE WILL ENDEAVOR TO PLEASE, MADAME.

NICE DOIN' BUSINESS WITH 'EE, CHIEF, AND THANKS FER GUIDING US T'PROVISIONS.

THANK YOU, CAPTAIN, FOR THE TRADE GOODS. HAVE A SAFE JOURNEY.

Our revels now are ended
These our actors
{CAROLE CURTIS, MARY HANSON-ROBERTS}
as I foretold, were all spirits
and are melted into air---
We are such stuff as
dreams are made---
Wm. Shakespeare
The Tempest

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